

# TEMPO

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Volume 9 *TEMPO* Winter 2011

Article 12

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Winter 2011

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### Recommended Citation

(2011). Live Lobby Music. *TEMPO*, 9 (1). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/tempo/vol9/iss1/12>

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# LIVE LOBBY MUSIC

*Alumna creates hospital performance program at hospital*

A unique community service opportunity developed by a Music School alumna allows students to offer their talent without taking their instruments far.

The program, which is called Live Lobby Music, arranges for students to perform at UPMC Mercy Hospital. It is the brainchild of Gretchen Chardos Benner, MT-BC, (Music Therapist-Board Certified), and has been in place since April 2009.

Benner, who graduated in May 2007 from the Music School with a double major—music therapy and music performance in viola—got the

idea for Live Lobby Music from her experience as a volunteer at Magee Women's Hospital. Every other week for three years when she was a student, she performed voluntarily on viola and piano in the lobby.

She saw the opportunity for volunteer performers to donate their time in a way that could provide joy for the patients, visitors and staff of UPMC Mercy. She outlined the idea to hospital administrators, who approved her plan, and within 30 days of suggesting the program, Benner had the first performers lined up, and Live Lobby Music was under way.

Mercy Hospital lies just to the east

of the Duquesne University campus, literally one block from the Music School's back door, a location that makes Live Lobby Music ideal for students. Most of the volunteers, more than 100 of them since Live Lobby Music's inception, have been students, but alumni are starting to share their talent in the program.

According to Benner, the musician volunteers are motivated to share their talent for its own sake, but many also use the opportunity to gain experience performing or to fulfill service-learning requirements for course work.

Guitarist Matthew Pena, who has volunteered six times, says that the

program has benefitted his playing. “My jazz improvisation skills are noticeably better because I can take what I learn from my lesson and apply those skills to a live performance every week,” he said. “Live Lobby Music is a great way to have fun and give back to the community through music.”

Chris Molinari, who has volunteered five times and has two more appearances lined up for him and his jazz ensemble, claims that the experience is both enjoyable and rewarding. He says, “Many staff members and visitors appreciate our presence in the hospital. Since we are not in a special stage area, people will come up to us between songs and talk to us about our music, about jazz, or just thank us for being there.”

Kerri Sullivan, who has volunteered for Live Lobby Music once a month for two years, says, “I keep coming back to give my time and talent because it is a joy for me to be around people, especially when I’m doing something that I love and they love.”

To funnel volunteers into the program, Benner relies on personal contacts and e-mail announcements, and she often makes the short trip to campus to recruit. Sullivan learned of the program when Benner made a pitch for Live Lobby Music to her service-learning class; Pena and Molinari volunteered after Benner spoke to their piano classes.

Volunteers agree to play for an hour, and Benner schedules their performances throughout the week and at various times of the day. The “stage” is a corner of the Level 2 lobby of Building E, near the stairway, elevators and a waiting area for endoscopy patients.

Live Lobby Music is freely given to the patients as well as the hospital’s staff and visitors, but in Benner’s vocation she uses music more purposefully.

Employed as a music therapist at UPMC Mercy since August 2008, Benner works with patients from two hospital units: the in-patient psychiatric

unit and the medical detoxification unit, where patients are struggling with chemical dependency issues.

Usually the groups that she works with have anywhere from 2 to 16 clients, and each day Benner leads three to four sessions, which last from 45 minutes to an hour. Sometimes there is interactive music making, and at other times therapy involves breathing techniques or physical exercises, such as stretching or movement—whatever the group needs on that particular day.

Not all of her clients are placed in the hospital voluntarily, but they do volunteer to take part in her therapy sessions. Music therapy, Benner says, can be beneficial for any patient in a health care setting.

Through Live Lobby Music and music therapy, Benner is proving that the benefits of music can extend to the staff and visitors of the hospital as well to patients. ●

## OPERA IN THE AISLES

This year, students in the voice program teamed up with Giant Eagle in a unique music outreach program called Opera in the Aisles.

In May and September 2010, the Opera Workshop performed for customers inside the Giant Eagle Market District supermarket in Robinson Township. Student vocalists, accompanied by a pianist, performed several arias for customers in 20-minute performances. The students were dressed as store employees who spontaneously broke into song. Guenko Guechev, chair of the voice department and director of the Opera Workshop, performed with the students. ●

